

Rep. Honda Helps Wounded Iraqi Veteran

Written by Mike Honda
Wednesday, 16 April 2008 19:00

After shrapnel from a roadside bomb in Iraq gashed his leg in 2005, the file supporting his case for a Purple Heart was lost in the chaos of war and in a system unprepared to handle thousands of medal requests from two large overseas conflicts.

The letter finally arrived with some hope for Saunders. After my office helped Saunders navigate the stressed military bureaucracy stretching from Baghdad to Washington, D.C., Saunders was told his request was approved, but he still does not know when he will receive it.

“After I was denied [the Purple Heart] I basically gave up on it,” said Saunders, whose family leaves in my district. “Congress was my last resort and Rep. Honda’s office renewed my hope.”

Even with my office’s involvement, it has taken almost two years of constant phone calls and correspondence with the Pentagon to get approval for Saunders’ Purple Heart. This situation is consistent with an Army stretched to the brink by two demanding overseas missions.

A soldier like Ralph who risked his life for his country, and shed his blood on foreign soil should not have to resort to his congressman to get the recognition he deserves. He is the victim of an outdated Cold War-era system, shell-shocked by the realities of a grinding occupation with a steady stream of casualties.

By definition, soldiers who are injured in combat receive Purple Heart medals. That, however, requires supporting paperwork, which includes statements from medical staff and commanding officers. At the end of February, more than 30,000 soldiers had been wounded in action both in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In June 2005, an improvised explosive device (IED) hit Saunders’ Humvee. The blast broke his nose and burrowed shrapnel into his leg. But two of his colleagues received far more serious injuries and were the medical team’s priority. Saunders was treated and sent back to his unit, with some of the shrapnel still imbedded in his flesh.

More than a year later, however, Saunders still had not received a Purple Heart. Saunders’s father, Ralph Saunders, Sr., contacted my district office and my staff started the process of untangling the convoluted case.

After more than a year of constant phone calls and letters to the Pentagon, it became clear the documentation for the Saunders case was incomplete at best, and at worst, the file had been lost. Also, because of rotations, it was hard to locate the team that treated Saunders.

At one point we were receiving conflicting correspondence from the Army. One letter in 2007 said the request was denied because of insufficient medical records and another letter a few days later said the request was pending and that it might take at least 10 months.

As my staff investigated the case, they realized the unit charged with reviewing cases such as

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Saunders' medal appeal, receives 15,000 applications a year to have records corrected. In Saunders's case, his medical file had to be reconstructed with the help of his captain in Iraq.

The Army approved his Purple Heart in November of last year, but it is uncertain when he might actually receive the honor. Saunders, however, might actually be fortunate. Veterans who have been discharged, or veterans from past conflicts, have cases that are complicated by the passage of time, paper files and witnesses who are impossible to track. The two current wars further slow down the process.

Unfortunately, this unnecessary war has taken our armed forces beyond their limit, whether it is awarding medals, or providing medical care to our wounded. Our men and women in uniform should not have to fight the system at home after they've fought the enemy overseas.